

OVERVIEW

California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care

Nearly 80,000 children live in foster care in California, removed from their parents for reasons of abuse or neglect. For these children, the State of California in effect functions as their “parent” and is legally responsible for their safety, permanency, and well-being. Courts, child welfare agencies, and other government agencies share responsibility for these youth, all of whom deserve a permanent family and a system that treats them fairly.

The Need for Court Reform

In California, every child who enters or leaves foster care must come before a dependency court judge. Courts and the legal process oversee critical and often life-changing decisions in that child’s life. Yet judges and lawyers face numerous obstacles in a system that does not always receive adequate support to ensure the best decisions for children and families. For example:

- Courts are understaffed and dockets are overcrowded. As a result, hearings may be rushed and courts may have only a matter of minutes to consider key decisions that affect children and families. Too often delays and continuances occur.
- Every child is assigned legal counsel, but because of high caseloads, children and parents may not be routinely involved in decisions that affect them. Foster youth sometimes do not meet their attorneys until the day of their hearing.
- Communication and information sharing with child welfare and other agencies working with families is challenging. Judges sometimes do not receive adequate information to make informed decisions.

Doing Better By California’s Children in Foster Care

In 2006, Chief Justice Ronald M. George appointed a Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care to provide recommendations on how courts and their partners can improve child welfare and fairness outcomes. Chaired by Associate Justice Carlos R. Moreno of the Supreme Court, the commission is charged with developing recommendations and an implementation plan covering three main areas. Areas of focus include:

- **Improved Court Performance and Accountability**
 - Manageable caseloads allowing sufficient time for more substantive hearings
 - Greater involvement of youth and families in decisions that affect their lives
 - More training for judges and attorneys
 - Better measures of progress in safety, permanency, well-being, and fairness
- **Improved Collaboration Among Agencies That Work With Families**
 - Streamlined communication and enhanced information sharing between courts, child welfare agencies, and education, public health, mental health, juvenile justice, and other relevant agencies

- **The Need for Adequate and Flexible Funding**

- Flexible use of funds so that money can be used to support the services that families need when they need them
- More funds for preventive services to help parents keep children in the home safely

The Blue Ribbon Commission meets quarterly and will present its recommendations to the Judicial Council in spring 2008. To learn more, visit www.courtinfo.ca.gov/jc/tflists/bluerib.htm.